Remarks at a Church Service Honoring Martin Luther King, Jr.
January 17, 2010

The President. Good morning. Praise be to God. Let me begin by thanking the entire Vermont Avenue Baptist Church family for welcoming our family here today. It feels like a family. Thank you for making us feel that way. To Pastor Wheeler, first lady Wheeler, thank you so much for welcoming us here today. Congratulations on Jordan Denice, a.k.a. Cornelia. [*Laughter*]

Michelle and I have been blessed with a new nephew this year as well, Austin Lucas Robinson. So maybe at the appropriate time we can make introductions. [*Laughter*] Now, if you're—if Jordan's father is like me, then that will be in about 30 years. [*Laughter*] That is a great blessing.

Michelle and Malia and Sasha and I are thrilled to be here today. And I know that sometimes you have to go through a little fuss to have me as a guest speaker. [*Laughter*] So let me apologize in advance for all the fuss.

We gather here on a Sabbath during a time of profound difficulty for our Nation and for our world. In such a time, it soothes the soul to seek out the Divine in a spirit of prayer, to seek solace among a community of believers. But we are not here just to ask the Lord for His blessing. We aren't here just to interpret His Scripture. We're also here to call on the memory of one of His noble servants, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Now, it's fitting that we do so here, within the four walls of Vermont Avenue Baptist Church, here in a church that rose like the phoenix from the ashes of the Civil War; here in a church formed by freed slaves, whose founding pastor had worn the Union blue; here in a church from whose pews congregants set out for marches and from whom choir anthems of freedom were heard, from whose sanctuary King himself would sermonize from time to time.

Now, one of those times was Thursday, December 6, 1956. Pastor, I think you said you were a little older than me, so were you around at that point? [*Laughter*]

Pastor Cornelius R. Wheeler. I was 3 years old.

The President. You were 3 years old, all right, okay. [*Laughter*] I wasn't born yet. [*Laughter*]

On Thursday, December 6, 1956, and before Dr. King had pointed us to the mountaintop, before he told us about his dream in front of the Lincoln Memorial, King came here, as a 27-year-old preacher, to speak on what he called "The Challenge of a New Age." The challenge of a new age. It was a period of triumph, but also uncertainty for Dr. King and his followers, because just weeks earlier, the Supreme Court had ordered the desegregation of Montgomery's buses, a hard-wrought, hard-fought victory that would put an end to the 381-day historic boycott down in Montgomery, Alabama.

And yet, as Dr. King rose to take that pulpit, the future still seemed daunting. It wasn't clear what would come next for the movement that Dr. King led. It wasn't clear how we were going to reach the promised land, because segregation was still rife, lynchings still a fact. Yes, the Supreme Court had ruled not only on the Montgomery buses but also on *Brown* v. *Board of Education*. And yet that ruling was defied throughout the South by schools and by States;

they ignored it with impunity. And here in the Nation's Capital, the Federal Government had yet to fully align itself with the laws on its books and the ideals of its founding.

So it's not hard for us, then, to imagine that moment. We can imagine folks coming to this church, happy about the boycott being over. We can also imagine them, though, coming here concerned about their future, sometimes second-guessing strategy, maybe fighting off some creeping doubts, perhaps despairing about whether the movement in which they had placed so many of their hopes, a movement in which they believed so deeply, could actually deliver on its promise.

So here we are, more than half a century later, once again facing the challenges of a new age. Here we are, once more marching toward an unknown future, what I call the Joshua generation to their Moses generation, the great inheritors of progress paid for with sweat and blood and sometimes life itself.

We've inherited the progress of unjust laws that are now overturned. We take for granted the progress of a ballot being available to anybody who wants to take the time to actually vote. We enjoy the fruits of prejudice and bigotry being lifted, slowly, sometimes in fits and starts, but irrevocably, from human hearts. It's that progress that made it possible for me to be here today, for the good people of this country to elect an African American the 44th President of the United States of America.

Reverend Wheeler mentioned the Inauguration, last year's election. You know, on the heels of that victory over a year ago, there were some who suggested that somehow we had entered into a postracial America, all those problems would be solved. There were those who argued that because I had spoke of a need for unity in this country that our Nation was somehow entering into a period of postpartisanship. That didn't work out so well. [*Laughter*] There was a hope shared by many that life would be better from the moment that I swore that oath.

Of course, as we meet here today, 1 year later, we know the promise of that moment has not yet been fully fulfilled. Because of an era of greed and irresponsibility that sowed the seeds of its own demise, because of persistent economic troubles unaddressed through the generations, because of a banking crisis that brought the financial system to the brink of catastrophe, we are being tested—in our own lives and as a nation—as few have been tested before.

Unemployment is at its highest level in more than a quarter of a century. Nowhere is it higher than the African American community. Poverty is on the rise. Home ownership is slipping. Beyond our shores, our sons and daughters are fighting two wars. Closer to home, our Haitian brothers and sisters are in desperate need. Bruised, battered, many people are legitimately feeling doubt, even despair, about the future. Like those who came to this church on that Thursday in 1956, folks are wondering, where do we go from here?

I understand those feelings. I understand the frustration and sometimes anger that so many folks feel as they struggle to stay afloat. I get letters from folks around the country every day; I read 10 a night out of the 40,000 that we receive. And there are stories of hardship and desperation, in some cases, pleading for help: "I need a job"; "I'm about to lose my home"; "I don't have health care; it's about to cause my family to be bankrupt." Sometimes you get letters from children: "My mama or my daddy have lost their jobs. Is there something you can do to help?" Ten letters like that a day we read.

So, yes, we're passing through a hard winter. It's the hardest in some time. But let's always remember that, as a people, the American people, we've weathered some hard winters before. This country was founded during some harsh winters. The fishermen, the laborers, the craftsmen who made camp at Valley Forge, they weathered a hard winter. The slaves and the freedmen who rode an underground railroad, seeking the light of justice under the cover of night, they weathered a hard winter. The seamstress whose feet were tired, the pastor whose voice echoes through the ages, they weathered some hard winters. It was for them, as it is for us, difficult in the dead of winter to sometimes see spring coming. They too sometimes felt their hopes deflate. And yet each season, the frost melts, the cold recedes, the sun reappears. So it was for earlier generations, and so it will be for us.

What we need to do is to just ask what lessons we can learn from those earlier generations about how they sustained themselves during those hard winters, how they persevered and prevailed. Let us in this Joshua generation learn how that Moses generation overcame.

Let me offer a few thoughts on this. First and foremost, they did so by remaining firm in their resolve. Despite being threatened by sniper fire or planted bombs, by shoving and punching and spitting and angry stares, they adhered to that sweet spirit of resistance, the principles of nonviolence that had accounted for their success.

Second, they understood that as much as our Government and our political parties had betrayed them in the past, as much as our Nation itself had betrayed its own ideals, government, if aligned with the interests of its people, can be—and must be—a force for good. So they stayed on the Justice Department. They went into the courts. They pressured Congress; they pressured their President. They didn't give up on this country. They didn't give up on government. They didn't somehow say government was the problem. They said, we're going to change government; we're going to make it better. Imperfect as it was, they continued to believe in the promise of democracy, in America's constant ability to remake itself, to perfect this Union.

Third, our predecessors were never so consumed with theoretical debates that they couldn't see progress when it came. Sometimes I get a little frustrated when folks just don't want to see that even if we don't get everything, we're getting something. King understood that the desegregation of the Armed Forces didn't end the civil rights movement, because black and white soldiers still couldn't sit together at the same lunch counter when they came home. But he still insisted on the rightness of desegregating the Armed Forces. That was a good first step, even as he called for more. He didn't suggest that somehow by the signing of the Civil Rights Act that somehow all discrimination would end. But he also didn't think that we shouldn't sign the Civil Rights Act because it hasn't solved every problem. Let's take a victory, he said, and then keep on marching. Forward steps, large and small, were recognized for what they were, which was progress.

Fourth, at the core of King's success was an appeal to conscience that touched hearts and opened minds, a commitment to universal ideals—of freedom, of justice, of equality—that spoke to all people, not just some people. For King understood that without broad support, any movement for civil rights could not be sustained. That's why he marched with the white auto worker in Detroit. That's why he linked arm with the Mexican farm worker in California, and united people of all colors in the noble quest for freedom.

Of course, King overcame in other ways as well. He remained strategically focused on gaining ground—his eyes on the prize constantly—understanding that change would not be easy, understand that change wouldn't come overnight, understanding that there'd be setbacks

and false starts along the way, but understanding, as he said in 1956, that "we can walk and never get weary, because we know there is a great camp meeting in the promised land of freedom and justice."

And it's because the Moses generation overcame that the trials we face today are very different from the ones that tested us in previous generations. Even after the worst recession in generations, life in America is not even close to being as brutal as it was back then for so many. That's the legacy of Dr. King and his movement. That's our inheritance. Having said that, let there be no doubt: The challenges of our new age are serious in their own right, and we must face them as squarely as they faced the challenges they saw.

Now, I know it's been a hard road we've traveled this year to rescue the economy, but the economy is growing again. The job losses have finally slowed, and around the country, there's signs that businesses and families are beginning to rebound. We are making progress.

I know it's been a hard road that we've traveled to reach this point on health reform. I promise you I know. [*Laughter*] But under the legislation I will sign into law, insurance companies won't be able to drop you when you get sick, and more than 30 million people, our fellow Americans, will finally have insurance. More than 30 million men and women and children, mothers and fathers, won't be worried about what might happen to them if they get sick. This will be a victory not for Democrats; this will be a victory for dignity and decency, for our common humanity. This will be a victory for the United States of America.

Let's work to change the political system, as imperfect as it is. I know people can feel down about the way things are going sometimes here in Washington. I know it's tempting to give up on the political process. But we've put in place tougher rules on lobbying and ethics and transparency, tougher rules than any administration in history. It's not enough, but it's progress. Progress is possible. Don't give up on voting. Don't give up on advocacy. Don't give up on activism. There are too many needs to be met, too much work to be done. Like Dr. King said, "We must accept finite disappointment but never lose infinite hope."

Let us broaden our coalition, building a confederation not of liberals or conservatives, not of red States or blue States, but of all Americans who are hurting today and searching for a better tomorrow. The urgency of the hour demands that we make common cause with all of America's workers—white, black, brown—all of whom are being hammered by this recession, all of whom are yearning for that spring to come. It demands that we reach out to those who've been left out in the cold even when the economy is good, even when we're not in recession: the youth in the inner cities, the youth here in Washington, DC; people in rural communities who haven't seen prosperity reach them for a very long time. It demands that we fight discrimination, whatever form it may come. That means we fight discrimination against gays and lesbians, and we make common cause to reform our immigration system.

And finally, we have to recognize, as Dr. King did, that progress can't just come from without, it also has to come from within. And over the past year, for example, we've made meaningful improvements in the field of education. I've got a terrific Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan. He's been working hard with States and working hard with the DC school district, and we've insisted on reform, and we've insisted on accountability. And we we're putting in more money, and we've provided more Pell grants and more tuition tax credits and simpler financial aid forms. We've done all that, but parents still need to parent. Kids still need to own up to their responsibilities. We still have to set high expectations for our young people. Folks can't simply look to government for all the answers without also looking inside themselves, inside their own homes, for some of the answers.

Progress will only come if we're willing to promote that ethic of hard work, a sense of responsibility, in our own lives. I'm not talking, by the way, just to the African American community. Sometimes when I say these things people assume, well, he's just talking to black people about working hard. No, no, no, no. I'm talking to the American community, because somewhere along the way, we as a nation began to lose touch with some of our core values. You know what I'm talking about. We became enraptured with the false prophets who prophesized an easy path to success, paved with credit cards and home equity loans and get-rich-quick schemes, and the most important thing was to be a celebrity; it doesn't matter what you do, as long as you get on TV. That's everybody.

We forgot what made the bus boycott a success, what made the civil rights movement a success, what made the United States of America a success, that in this country, there's no substitute for hard work, no substitute for a job well done, no substitute for being responsible stewards of God's blessings.

What we're called to do, then, is rebuild America from its foundation on up. To reinvest in the essentials that we've neglected for too long, like health care, like education, like a better energy policy, like basic infrastructure, like scientific research. Our generation is called upon to buckle down and get back to basics.

We must do so not only for ourselves but also for our children and their children, for Jordan—[*laughter*]—and for Austin. That's a sacrifice that falls on us to make. It's a much smaller sacrifice than the Moses generation had to make, but it's still a sacrifice.

Yes, it's hard to transition to a clean energy economy. Sometimes it may be inconvenient, but it's a sacrifice that we have to make. It's hard to be fiscally responsible when we have all these human needs and we're inheriting enormous deficits and debt, but that's a sacrifice that we're going to have to make. You know, it's easy, after a hard day's work, to just put your kid in front of the TV set—you're tired, don't want to fuss with them—instead of reading to them, but that's a sacrifice we must joyfully accept.

Sometimes it's hard to be a good father and good mother. Sometimes it's hard to be a good neighbor or a good citizen, to give up time in service of others, to give something of ourselves to a cause that's greater than ourselves, as Michelle and I are urging folks to do tomorrow to honor and celebrate Dr. King. But these are sacrifices that we are called to make. These are sacrifices that our faith calls us to make: our faith in the future; our faith in America our faith in God.

And on his sermon all those years ago, Dr. King quoted a poet's verse:

Truth forever on the scaffold, Wrong forever on the throne,—

. . . and, behind the dim unknown,

Stands God within the shadows, keeping watch above his own.

Even as Dr. King stood in this church, a victory in the past and uncertainty in the future, he trusted God. He trusted that God would make a way, a way for prayers to be answered, a way for our Union to be perfected, a way for the arc of the moral universe, no matter how long, to slowly bend towards truth and bend towards freedom, to bend towards justice. He had faith that God would make a way out of no way.

You know, folks ask me sometimes why I look so calm. [*Laughter*] They say, "All this stuff coming at you, how come you just seem calm?" And I have a confession to make here. There

are times where I'm not so calm. [*Laughter*] Reggie Love knows. My wife knows. There are times when progress seems too slow. There are times when the words that are spoken about me hurt. There are times when the barbs sting. There are times when it feels like all these efforts are for naught, and change is so painfully slow in coming, and I have to confront my own doubts.

But let me tell you, during those times, it's faith that keeps me calm; it's faith that gives me peace, the same faith that leads a single mother to work two jobs to put a roof over her head when she has doubts; the same faith that keeps an unemployed father to keep on submitting job applications even after he's been rejected a hundred times; the same faith that says a teacher even if the first nine children she's teaching she can't reach, that that 10th one she's going to be able to reach; the same faith that breaks the silence of an earthquake's wake with the sound of prayers and hymns sung by a Haitian community; a faith in things not seen, in better days ahead, in Him who holds the future in the hollow of His hand; and a faith that lets us mount up on wings like eagles, lets us run and not be weary, lets us run—lets us walk and not faint.

So let us hold fast to that faith, as Joshua held fast to the faith of his fathers, and together, we shall overcome the challenges of a new age. Together, we shall seize the promise of this moment. Together, we shall make a way through the winter, and we're going to welcome the spring. Through God all things are possible.

May the memory of Dr. Martin Luther King continue to inspire us and ennoble our world and all who inhabit it, and may God bless the United States of America. Thank you very much, everybody. God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12 p.m. at the Vermont Avenue Baptist Church. In his remarks, he referred to Cornelius R. Wheeler, senior pastor, Vermont Avenue Baptist Church, his wife Carla, their son Jason, and their granddaughter Jordan Denice; and Personal Aide to the President Reginald L. Love.

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